

Lead ban is replay of asbestos scam

■ Program by EPA stirs up another panic over fraudulent fears.

By Bill Kramer

THE Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has just proclaimed its official death sentence for another American industry. This means the long-suffering public will be stuck an enormous burial bill, running to countless hundreds of billions.

Though actual death has not yet been inflicted, EPA pronounced last rites over lead producers at their annual meeting recently in Washington. If the agency has its way, the remains will be disposed of at Superfund sites.

Across the nation there will be few mourners over the demise of lead. That's because we've all been brainwashed into believing that this old friend of humankind is deadly in any form or quantity.

This is absolutely untrue.

HYSTERICAL DENUNCIATIONS of lead and paranoid programs to eliminate it are a return of the totally discredited asbestos scam. In 1989, EPA bureaucrats, citing erroneous conclusions from irrelevant studies, banned asbestos. Last October, however, the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals threw out the ban. The court bluntly stated that the agency's own data showed asbestos less harmful than using toothpicks.

In the case of lead, there has never been disagreement that an overdose is dangerous. High levels in the blood can cause brain damage, convulsions and paralysis. We became aware of this 20 years ago and banned lead in paint, most gasoline, and curbed industrial discharges into the atmosphere.

As a result, lead in American bloodstreams has dropped by more than two-thirds, and deaths from lead poisoning are almost unheard of.

Yet EPA and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), prodded by environmental groups such as the Environmental Defense Fund and others, say that current minuscule amounts of lead result in lower IQ scores — especially among children.

If low levels of lead impair intelligence, it stands to reason that as lead levels drop, IQs would rise.

This hasn't happened. In fact, quite the reverse. As lead has been removed from our surroundings, American IQs have actually fallen. Obviously, factors other than lead levels are affecting the scores.

Even so, Health and Human Services Secretary Louis Sullivan maintains lead is "the No. 1 environmental threat to the health of children in the United States."

What Sullivan needs is advice from

an unbiased panel of scientific advisers. Yet when EPA appointed such a panel in 1983, they ignored its findings.

Like sugar, salt or most other substances, at low levels lead is harmless. Responsible studies around the world confirm this.

But EPA and CDC, quoting widely criticized, possibly fraudulent research, are marching lockstep to eliminate all uses of lead.

"We cannot afford to chase after lead in every category of society," declared John Melone, head of risk assessment at EPA's Office of Pollution Prevention and Toxics, before lead industry executives. Then he announced a program to do just that.

Among other things, it would:

■ Prohibit sale of lead solder, putty or other substances containing lead by plumbing supply outlets. Since hardware, building supply stores and even supermarkets carry such items, the ban would have to be total and cover all outlets.

■ Ban lead in all plumbing products within 10 years.

■ Eliminate lead from art supplies such as ceramics, paints, etc. Lead would even be prohibited for stained-glass art as in windows, light fixtures and decorative pieces, though such use has been a tradition around the world for hundreds of years.

■ List all products in which lead is used. (The obvious aim: Eliminate all uses.)

■ Compel prior approval for new uses of lead. Since lead will be essentially banned, it's hard to imagine that new uses — no matter how desirable — might be proposed. What this does is shut down numerous important avenues of scientific advancement.

Other ridiculous demands of fright-mongers in EPA and the environmental community are that all American children be tested for blood-lead levels, that homeowners be forced to "remediate" lead before they can sell, and that used oil (used oil?) be declared a hazardous waste.

The costs of all this are incalculable. Lead is a vital component of many essential products — batteries, for one. While there are substitutes, they are enormously expensive and often less than satisfactory.

A lone exception to a total ban might be lead-lined containers for long-term storage of radioactive nuclear waste.

WHY DOES EPA consistently stir up panic over fraudulent fears? Because the programs needed to control imaginary dangers will bring its bureaucrats greater power, bigger salaries, more personnel and expanded budgets.

The same motivations drive environmental groups to support phony reports of disaster and doomsday. Frightened Americans make massive contributions to help keep the sky from falling.

Bill Kramer is a syndicated columnist who writes on environmental issues.

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